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ABSTRACT

Although the role that empathy plays in communication transactions is an important one, there is a great deal of confusion surrounding that term as it is used in the field of communication. Empathy may be best defined as a process consisting of 3 stages: (1) decentering, which requires a shift in focus or multiple perspectives; (2) role-taking, which consists of perceptual and conceptual processes and the affective state; and (3) communication, which is nonevaluative, problem oriented, and receptive, and indicates commitment. Characteristics of the empathic process include viewing it as a series of successive approximations, requiring the integration of cognition and affect, making possible the bridging of differences, and being influenced by variables in the communication process. Understanding the empathic process is an important part of being able to deal with differences people encounter throughout their lives. (DF)

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A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF EMPATHY AND ITS ROLE IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Formulating communicative intentions and goals, devising strategies to accomplish communicative purposes, constructing messages, and engaging in communicative behaviors are all influenced by the extent to which one considers the perspective of the other person(s) in a communication transaction, yet there is much confusion surrounding the term within the field of communication. Definitions of empathy "inherited" by communication scholars from counseling and psychology are inappropriate for describing the dynamic nature of interpersonal communication. This essay argues for a multi-stage view of empathy which differs in significant ways from previous conceptualizations.

A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF EMPATHY AND ITS ROLE IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION

When one thinks about the many ways in which our language deceives us, about the array of environmental, cultural, sociological, and psychological variables that interfere with interpersonal understanding, and about the many differences in perception that lead to harsh conflicts and misunderstandings, it is easy to become discouraged about the prospects for effective communication. On the other hand one can look in amazement at the countless occasions on which people reach mutually acceptable levels of understanding by simply making sounds with their mouths and movements with their bodies. Indeed, interpersonal communication is at the same time both a risky venture and a miraculous event.[1] The process which makes it possible for participants in communication events to move toward functional levels of understanding is EMPATHY. The miraculous or the disasterous occurs to the extent that individuals are able to understand each other's point of view.

The concept of empathy has been most fully developed in the fields of psychology, counseling, and psychotherapy [2]. It has been defined as a personality characteristic,[3] as accuracy in predicting another's internal state,[5] as emotional identification with another individual,[5] as the process of cognitive role-taking,[6] and as communicating a sense of understanding to another.[7] In the field of communication,

empathy is recognized as important to communication competence, [8] and recently scholars have begun to explore the nature and definition of empathy.[9]

While there is considerable disagreement concerning the meaning of the term, most approaches to empathy associate it in some way with the attempt to consider the perspective of the other person(s) in a communication event. However, the views of empathy "inherited" from counseling and psychology are inappropriate for viewing the dynamic nature of interpersonal communication, and there is considerable confusion surrounding the use of the term in communication theory and research. Empathy is involved in many important aspects of communication behavior; formulating communicative intentions and goals, devising strategies to accomplish communicative purposes, constructing messages consistent with communicative strategies, and engaging in verbal and non-verbal communicative behaviors are all influenced by the communicator's attempts (or lack thereoff) to consider the perspective of the other person. It is the purpose of this essay to explicate the nature of the empathic process in interpersonal communication encounters, hopefully clarifying much of the confusion surrounding use of the term and providing a framework for greater use of the concept in teaching and research.

EMPATHY: A BASIC COMPONENT OF THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Beyond Projection and Agreement

Much of what passes for interpersonal understanding in our daily encounters with others is probably either a form of "projection" or mutual agreeement. Projection involves attributing our own thoughts to the other in a particular communication situation; it occurs when we imagine how we would feel or think if we were facing the circumstances of the other. Much interpersonal communication can proceed on the basis of projection, and in most cases such a basis is reasonable - we usually talk to people who are involved in the same kind of work that we are in, live in the same kind of neighborhood we live in, attend the same school we attend, are members of the same social organization, enjoy the same kind of leisure activities, and so on. But as Dance and Larson point out, for heightened degrees of interpersonal understanding projection is insufficient.[10]

A primary emphasis in interaction is the achievement of agreement. Communicators gain a sense of satisfaction when there is a commonality of thinking. However, it is more important to achieve what George Kelly speaks of as "interpersonal understandings", and not merely "common understandings."[11] He writes that the person who is to play a constructive role in a social process such as interaction need not so much construe things as the other person does as she must effectively construe the other person's outlooks. In other words, for one to be able to communicate effectively with each another on an interpersonal basis, it takes more than a similarity or commonality in thinking

- it means that participants must seek to understand each other's way of looking at the world.

One of the earliest communication theorists to elaborate on the concept of empathy, David Berlo, described it as the primary mechanism that makes understanding possible between two interdependent individuals.[12] In any communication situation, A affects B, and B affects A. Berlo identifies four levels of communicative interdependence. At one level, participants in a communication encounter require each other for their very definition. When two people are communicating, they rely on the physical existence of the other for the production or reception of messages - you cannot define a receiver without defining a source, and you cannot define a source without defining a receiver. At a second level of complexity, responses are utilized by communicators as feedback and thereby affect subsequent responses. Feedback provides the source with information concerning his success in accomplishing his objective, and so exerts control over future messages which the source encodes. At a third level of analysis, individuals have the capacity to make trial responses within the organism, to anticipate how others will respond to their messages, and to develop expectations about their own behavior as well as the behavior of others. We infer the internal states of others by comparing them to our own attitudes and predispositions. We imagine the internal states or personalities of others in order to predict how they will behave. This process is called <u>empathy</u> and is the basis for Berlo's fourth level of interdependence

which involves reciprocal role-taking, the mutual performance of empathic behaviors. The two individuals make inferences about their own roles and take the role of the other at the same time. Their communication behavior depends on the reciprocal taking of roles. Berlo summarizes his discussion in the following manner:

> Communication represents an attempt to couple two organisms, to bridge the gap between two individuals through the production and reception of messages which have meanings for both. . . . When two people interact, they put themselves into each other's shoes, try to perceive the world as the other person perceives it, try to predict how the other will respond. Interaction involves reciprocal role-taking, the mutual employment of empathic skills.[13]

Making Subjective Experience Intersubjective

In order to understand the vital role played by empathy in the interpersonal communication process, it is helpful to consider the nature of human perceptual processes. For George Kelly, every person is a "scientist," interested in prediction and control of her environment.[14] Individuals look at the world through transparent patterns or templets which they create and attempt to fit over the realities of which the world is composed. Kelly gives the name "constructs" to these patterns, and says that without these constructs "the world appears to be such an undifferentiated homogeneity that man is unable to make any sense out of it." [15] Through the use of constructs, individuals are able to predict to some degree the course of events, including the behavior of another. Kelly says that we

come to understand our world through an infinite series of successive approximations. We formulate a construct, test it for its usefulness, and either maintain it or reformulate the construct. It is, of course, then retested time and again.

An important point in Kelly's theory is that different persons construe the universe in different ways. Even if a person has experienced the same events as another, the two will not necessarily construe them in the same way. At the same time, two people can have similar constructions even if they have each been exposed to quite different stimuli. Therefore, we can never assume that we have similar psychological processes as another because of similar experience, nor can we assume that we do not have similar processes because of differing experience.

These differences in ways of constructing events leads to what Swanson and Delia term the "categoricentric predicament."[16] Stated most simply, the categoricentric predicament poses the following question:

> If I have my categories through which I interpret and experience the world and if you have your categories, how is it possible that we may know something about one another's individual experience? or, if experience is subjective in its possession by a single person, how is intersubjective - that is, shared - experience or knowledge possible? In short, can two persons ever hope to communicate? [17]

The authors answer this question by saying that the predicament is "best overcome in the face-to-face situation in which two persons, each engaging in explicit, systematic perspective-

taking, constantly communicate with sensitivity to the perspective of the other." [18]

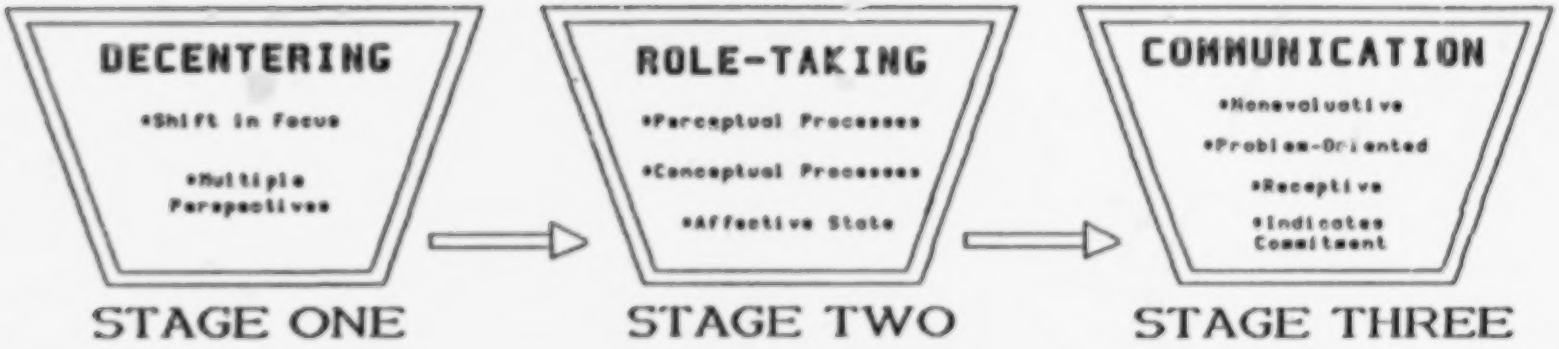
EMPATHY AS A MULTIPLE-STAGE PROCESS

Empathy is employed here to refer to all the interpretive and communicative processes by which a person represents another's perspective or point of view on a situation. Empathy is not an isolated, self-contained unit of action; rather it involves several stages and multiple communication behaviors. Specifically, the empathic process is characterized by three stages: (1) decentering, (2) role-taking, and (3) a particular quality of communication behaviors. These three stages are summarized in Figure 1.

Decentering

Empathy is not an automatic process. We each construe our worlds from particular points of view, and the tendency is to see events almost exclusively from our own point of view. Most of us fail to realize that others may have different ways of interpreting experience and therefore we seldom seek the other's perspective on reality. To the extent that we focus on our own point of view during interaction, we say that we are "egocentric."

Empathy is the opposite of egocentrism, in that we must move away from our own perspective exclusively and direct our thoughts toward the other's way of perceiving a particular event. This is made possible by what Piaget refers to as decentering.[19] By



Multi-Stage Process of EMPATHY
(Broome 1985)

FIGURE 1

11

decentering Piaget means that we focus attention on the other, considering the thought and speech of the other person. Dance and Larson say that in decentering we "spend relatively more time attending to and considering the implications of what the other is saying and doing, and spend relatively less time attending to our own wants, needs, and intentions."[20]

This shift in focus increases the likelihood that interpersonal understanding will occur. Decentering sets in motion a particular orientation to action when one is engaged in interpersonal communication. In essence, a motivation is developed for learning about the other person; the perceiver exhibits an attitude of "discovery" that indicates she hears what the person says and is interested in why that person said it. She wonders about the causes of the other's perception. She would like to know the reasons for the other's statements. She feels receptive to more feedback from the person, and she feels that her attributions are flexible and may change as more information is acquired. In essence, decentering brings about a real desire to know more, a motivation to discover where the other person is coming from. In the absense of this motivation, it is doubtful that we will focus attention on the other person, putting forth effort to seek the other's frame of reference.

Role-taking

In decentering we are able to consider and coordinate multiple perspectives simultaneously, and to differentiate between our own thoughts, knowledge, feelings and perspectives as well as those of the other. This cognitive state allows us to

emloy the second essential step in the empathic process, what George Herbert Mead refers to as role-taking. Mead suggests that communication involving "participation in the other" is the basic principle of human social organization.[21] He espoused a theory regarding the development of the self, of thought, and of social order revolving around the concept of role-taking. Role-taking, in Mead's terms is an internal, imaginative activity. Couter, a social psychologist influenced by Mead, described the process as one:

> . . . by which a person momentarily pretends to himself that he is another person, projects himself into the perceptual field of the other person, imaginatively puts himself in the other person's place, in order that he may get an insight into the other person's probable behavior in a given situation. [22]

Experience teaches a person how to anticipate the responses of the other and to control her own activity by the double process of injecting herself into the role of others and experimenting with the possible responses they might have to an action she is contemplating. This requires, Mead says, "the appearance of the other in the self, the identification of the other with the self, the reaching of self-consciousness through the other."[23] By taking the role of the other we can come to understand the outlooks of the other.

Role-taking can occur on three different levels: the cultural level, the sociological level, and the psychological level.[24] Role-taking at the cultural level is based upon the

total set of characteristics attributed to a large group of people having a common set of norms and values. Predictions at the sociological level are based upon assumptions about particular groups within the cultures. Predictions at the psychological level are based upon encounters with particular individuals and assumptions about the unique characteristics or properties of those individuals. In interaction with strangers, decentering usually involves only the cultural and sociological levels of prediction. As we know persons better we can more closely construe the unique manner in which they have defined a particular role for themselves.

Role-taking can also occur in relation to three diverse domains of content. [25] Individuals can consider the perceptual processes of another by inferring what the other sees or perceptually experiences. Persons can also consider the conceptual processes of another by inferring what another thinks or knows. Finally, it is possible to consider the affective state of another by inferring what another feels or experiences emotionally. Role-taking ability is not necessarily consistent across these three different domains. In a particular communication encounter, a person may be able to infer information related to one of the content areas of the other and not be tuned in to the other aspects of the person's experience.

Empathic Communication

Although empathy is generally perceived as primarily an intrapsychic process, decentering and role-taking result in a particular quality of verbal and nonverbal messages which are

exchanged between the participants. Even though humans have the capacity to disguise their inner thoughts, it can be argued that behavior provides insights to the workings of the mind. The following characteristics of communication serve to indicate that the user has decentered and is making efforts to construe an understanding of the other rather than focus predominately on his own psychological state.

Nonevaluative. Dean Barnlund wrote that communication is facilitated when there is a capacity to create a nonevaluative atmosphere.[26] Defenses are provoked not so much by the expectation of difference as by the expectation of criticism. When we evaluate, we are focusing attention on our own wants, needs, and intentions. When we judge, evaluate, approve, or disapprove the statements of another person we are looking at the situation from our own point of view. On the other hand, we are more likely to express and examine a wider range of differences when the communication is descriptive rather than evaluative. When the intent is to comprehend rather than to attack, there is indication that the participants are seeking the other's perspective, focusing on the other's point of view. Gibb says that descriptive communication involves the presentation of feelings, events, perceptions, or processes which do not ask or imply that the receiver change behavior or attitude.[27] According to Barnlund, non-evaluative communication allows individuals to ". . . participate in each other's experience, sharing the assumptions, the perspectives, and the meanings that events hold for them." [28]

Problem Oriented. Closely related to the effects of evaluation are the consequences of control-oriented behavior in a relationship. When we have evaluated someone as not holding the "right" attitude, value, or belief, our very natural tendency is to attempt to change the other person's mind, to get the other to do something to change, or in some way to influence the other. In this way we take responsibility for getting the other person to see things as we see them. As evaluation means that we are viewing the situation from our own perspective, control-oriented communication means that we are trying to get the other person to see it the way we do. Gibb indicates that communication which is used to control another invokes resistance. Problem oriented communication, on the other hand, implies that we have no predetermined solution, attitudes, or method to impose. When we communicate a desire to collaborate in defining a mutual problem and in seeking its solution, there is indication that we are seeking the other's perspective and focusing attention on the other's frame of reference.

Receptive. Another barrier which impedes progress toward understanding is unreceptivity. When we seem to know all the answers, we communicate that we are not willing to enter into a shared problem-solving relationship. We indicate that we do not want to know what the other is thinking or where the other is coming from. No attempt is made to focus attention on the other. On the other hand, when we are receptive we indicate a need for additional data; we seek for clarification of the problem. We focus attention on the other; we indicate that we want to know what the other person is thinking and where the other is coming

from. By sending verbal and nonverbal messages which indicate that more information is desired, the empathic process is facilitated.

Commitment. While we all have the capacity to interpret the interpretive systems of others, the act of doing so requires a considerable degree of effort.[30] An indicataion that one is making efforts to understand is an important characteristic of empathic messges. As discussed earlier, we have a very natural tendency to be egocentric in communicating with others. It becomes important that the participants in an encounter are committed to moving toward some kind of mutual understanding. A desire to discover and learn about the other person may be necessary for the empathic process to operate. This does not mean, however, that the perceiver is necessarily aware of the effort being put forth. While a conscious decision may have been made to decenter and seek the other's point of view, the process itself is holistic, with much of the information processing conducted out-of-awareness. The perceiver becomes caught up in listening and responding to the other person; stopping to analyze that process may move the perceiver out of the empathic mode.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EMPATHIC PROCESS

The framework developed in the previous section and outlined in Figure 1 incorporates many of the ideas traditionally associated with the concept of empathy. However, it differs in significant ways from many of the present-day treatments of

empathy. First, "accuracy" is deemphasized as the primary goal of the empathic process. Second, the position that empathy is primarily an affective activity is replaced by an integration of the cognitive and affective aspects of the empathic process. Third, the notion that similarity is necessary in order for empathy to occur is rejected in favor of a view of empathy as essential in bridging situations of major differences. Fourth, the focus on empathy as a personality trait or individual ability is transformed into an emphasis on the relational aspects of the empathic process.

It Involves a Series of "Successive Approximations."

Empathy is not an "all-or-nothing" phenomonon, something that one does or does not do; it involves an infinite series of successive approximations. When we are trying to determine another's frame of reference, we first make a "guess" as to where that person is coming from. We then seek more information and make another guess, and another, and so on, until some kind of satisfactory understanding is approached as to the person's point of view. Empathy entails formulating a construct about the other's frame of reference, testing it for its usefulness, and either maintaining it or reformulating the construct. It is then retested time and again.

In viewing empathy as a series of successive approximations to the other's point of view during social interaction, there is not as much concern with "accuracy" as there seems to be in many conceptualizations of empathy. For some accurately inferring another's thoughts is the definitive characteristic of

empathy,[31] although others do not view accuracy as a necessary part of the concept's meaning.[32] The term "accuracy" is an ambiguous one for which it is difficult to determine criteria, and most studies of perceptual accuracy have been criticized on a number of grounds.[33] Accuracy could be the result of many factors besides empathy. The perceiver could simply be projecting her own processes onto a similar other; or the perceiver could simply be responding with cultural or sociological stereotypes which the other happens to fit. While empathy may result in accuracy, it should not be equated with it.

More importantly, empathy must not be viewed as an absolute process. While empathy involves such things as "seeing the world through another person's eyes" or "putting ourselves in another person's shoes," this can never be completely accomplished. We can never become another person. As Swanson and Delia point out: ". . . total and complete understanding between persons is probably a goal never achieved."[34] We can, however, erect a structure within the framework of which the other's interpretation of the world or of us as a communicator takes shape or assumes meaning. This is a continuous process and is what we mean when we say "take the role of the other", "construe the other's constructions", or "seek the other's point of view". When Kelly speaks of construing the other's constructions, he means that we note features in a series of behaviors which characterize some of the behaviors and are particularly uncharacteristic of others. Thus we erect constructs of similarity and contrast. These constructions must be continually adjusted during interaction. Thus, empathy allows two

individuals to move toward varying degrees of understanding.

It Requires the Integration of Cognition and Affect

Many approaches to empathy dwell on the affective or emotional aspects of behavior. The counseling literature indicates that it is the therapist's job to sense the other's "confusion or his timidity or his anger or his feelings of being treated unfairly."[35] Some have defined empathy as "an observer's reacting emotionally because he perceives that another is experiencing or is about to experience an emotion." [36] The counselor's job is viewed as "an active experiencing with the client of the feelings to which he gives expression."[37] Even in the communication literature it is sometimes advocated that that the term empathy "should be reserved for the process of feeling what another feels."[38] For some writers, an attempt to be rational may interfere with empathy, preventing one from experiencing the other's feelings.

It is suggested here that the "classical threefold division of psychology into cognition, affection, and conation" [39] be abandoned in developing a "communication relevant" definition of empathy. This is not to say that one does not have feelings or that they need not be understood, but it is to agree with Piaget, who said that cognitive and affective aspects of behavior are inseparable and complementary.[40] As pointed out by Reardon: "Since empathy is neither a purely cognitive or purely emotional activity, it requires concurrent usage of those areas of the brain which allow reasoning and emotion."[41] Many researchers who have discussed the right and left brain hemispheres emphasize

that the two work together to interpret experience.[42] When one is seeking to create an understanding of another through empathy, he can certainly experience feelings similar to the other, but the focus is on the process of arriving at integrative understandings of another's perceptual field by an affective and cognitive assimilation of the other's values, meanings, symbols, intentions, etc. As understanding begins to take place between the two communicators, they come to know the organization of each other's world or self view, and this includes feelings and emotions.

It Makes Possible the "Bridging of Differences"

In many previous conceptualizations, empathy is viewed as facilitated by similarity between the communicators and hindered, perhaps even rendered impossible, by major differences between communicators in values, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. As Katz writes: "We find it more difficult to empathize with strangers. . . . It is a matter of common experience that we find it more difficult to establish empathy with those who are different from us. . . . We tend to empathize with those who are familiar to us or whose life situation is most similar to our own."[43] Howell makes a similar point:

> What has not been experienced cannot be perceived, and when two members of a mixed culture dyad share few experiences the likelihood of mistaken perceptions is great. Whatever contributes to high fidelity empathy must be familiar to the receiver and be in a common code. Also, feelings and thoughts are expressed differently in varied cultures and

> languages. Such obstacles to accurate perception of empathic messages make it unlikely that two strangers with different backgrounds can be constructively empathic with one another. If empathy develops, it is more likely to be false than valid and be more deceptive than helpful.[44]

Here it is recognized that similarity of constructs may aid in understanding, but the idea is rejected that similarity is essential for empathy to occur. Kelly points out that even if a person has experienced the same events as another, the two will not necessarily construe them in the same way, and two people can have similar constructions of reality even if they have each been exposed to quite different phenomenal stimuli.[45] The important point, however, is that empathy does not rest on the assumption of similarity, but instead makes possible the bridging of differences. Every person will construe reality in different ways, and we cannot always create a sense of understanding by refering to a common experience in the past. By assuming similarity we turn our attention back on ourselves, and this preoccupation with our own feelings blunts our sensitivity to others. Empathy in interpersonal communication reduces the tendency to use ourselves as lightning rods, to judge others by our own feelings, choices, and preferences.[46] Empathy, where two participants are each seeking the other's point of view, allows us to communicate on a deeper level and apprehend the other person more completely. While differences may make it more difficult to understand another, participants can create through decentering what Howell calls "on-the-spot homogeneity"[47] which

can provide the information necessary for role-taking.

Empathic communication is particularly important when there are significant differences between the subjective worlds of two participants in a communication event. As long as we are communicating with someone who has developed relatively similar constructs for viewing the world, we can engage in satisfactory communication on the basis of projection. This is far from being the case in conflict situations and in intercultural situations. A problem encountered by communicators of different viewpoints or cultures is the potential lack, or total lack, of overlapping interpretations and understandings. Participants may lack any common basis for communicating with understanding. It is impossible in these cases to move toward understanding solely on the basis of projection, and accuracy of prediction may be an unattainable goal. Attempts must be made to construe an image of the other's world and then test this image over and over again. This is certainly not an easy task, and it requires a great deal of effort. As Swanson and Delia appropriately write:

> . . . we are all egocentric to some extent. We put aside fundamental beliefs about what the world is like only with the greatest of effort and difficulty. To "enter" the symbolic world of another, particularly a person from a radically different culture, may be one of the most ambitious and demanding tasks we can undertake as human communicators. Yet that is precisely the skill that is required, in varying degrees, in every communicative context - intercultural or otherwise.[48]

It is Influenced by Variables in the Communication Process

Past attempts to develop more effective empathy have focused mainly on characteristics of the communicator. Hogan, for example, points out five items most characteristic of the empathizer: (1) this person is socially perceptive of a wide range of interpersonal cues; (2) this person is skilled in social techniques of imaginitive play, pretending, and humor; (3) this person seems to be aware of the impression he/she makes on others; (4) this person has insight into his/her own motives and behavior; and (5) this person evaluates the motivation of others in interpreting situations.[49] Grief suggests that empathic persons are characterized by a potent and forebearing nature, affiliative but socially ascendent tendencies, and by liberal and humanistic political and religious attitudes.[50] Katz characterizes the effective empathizer as being one who respects the integrity of others, accepts himself/herself, is capable of spontaneity, tolerates anxiety, and has courage and patience to suspend judgment.[51]

While empathy might represent some form of ability or skill of the individual, it is not excusively so. To restrict empathy in this manner reflects a unidirectional view of the process. Much of the psychological, counseling and psychotheraputic literature, in which most of the writing and research on empathy has been reported, is concerned primarily with one person empathizing with another. Empathy is part of the communication process, and it may be influenced by the variables in that process. Because empathy is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon, it is continually influenced and modified by the feedback in the

communication process. The other's feedback, both conscious and unconscious, both verbal and non-verbal, allows us to determine how well we have construed the other's perspective. We correct and adjust our perceptions and messages, allowing us to seek some degree of integration. Empathy is part of an on-going, corrective process that is dynamic and circular. In this way, it reflects the interdependence of participants and the transactional nature of communication.

Our efforts to continuously seek the other's point of view may be more persistent in some situations than in others. This is illustrated in a study by Broome, in which individuals were asked to respond to a criticism which was stated in either an "open-minded" manner or in a "closed-minded" manner.[52] Responses of the participants to open wording was significantly more empathic (i.e., non-evaluative, problem oriented, receptive, and committed) than were responses to closed wording of criticisms. Thus, use of empathic communication can be facilitated by the type of communication used by the other person. It may be very difficult, despite one's best efforts, to decenter and seek the other's perspective when the other's communication discourages the attempt. On the other hand, it appears that empathy can be encouraged by verbal messages which indicate a willingness to be open.

Empathy, then, is co-directional, involving both participants in an interpersonal encounter, each seeking to construe the other's construction system for purposes of moving toward understanding. While persons possessing certain

characteristics may be more adept at this than others, it is also important to consider characteristics of the encounter itself. The interpersonal climate, characteristics of the sender, type of feedback, perception of the other, possession of certain abilities or skills in responding, experience in interpersonal communication, general state of being at the moment, and many other factors may influence the presence of empathy in an encounter. These points are well illustrated in the following quotation from Katz: "Psychological understanding, as Reik observed, comes to us in a round-about way. It accrues to us - we cannot go after it. It emerges when certain conditions are ripe."[53]

CONCLUSION

In today's world, where multiple realities confront us daily, decentering, role-taking, and empathic communication are central to communication competence. Understanding the empathic process is an important and necessary step in dealing with the differences we face in every aspect of our lives. Not all of our interpersonal encounters require decentering or involve role-taking, and empathic communication is inappropriate in many circumstances. In fact, it is possible that the majority of our daily communications don't have to be modified to specific aspects of the listener's perspective. However, in situations where significant relevant differences exist and must be confronted, the empathic process must be engaged. By developing an empathic attitude towards communication and by employing empathic skills in these situations, we are not only able to understand others better, but at the same time we encourage

messages from the other which lead to our mutual engagement in effective and productive communication.

FOOTNOTES

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